

Inspiring Dedication in Our Athletes and Their Families

A World Clinic Presentation By John Leonard, San Diego, 1996

Part I. Definition.

What is Dedication? Dictionary - "To set apart, to consecrate to a sacred purpose. To devote wholly and earnestly to some purpose. To be wholly committed to a cause or purpose."

Part II. What do coaches and others have to say about the issue?

Question: Does the USA Swimming Community as a whole have a lessened degree of dedication today than it did 25 or 30 years ago?

Some Answers: "Athletes thirty years ago were easier to get to do the work than athletes today."

"In 1966, athletes wanted it more, they wanted to achieve, they were hungrier than they are today."

"I stopped coaching in 1986, but I think athletes had more parental push behind them awhile back . . . I think parents had a lot more to do with children's activities in those days."

"In 1960 our teams were smaller, but we had a easier time getting people to try things that were difficult."

"Kids came from different backgrounds then . . . they didn't have as many distractions for one thing."

"Swimmers didn't have 180 channels of TV to watch until recently. They didn't have computer games, and computer homework. They played outside, with their friends. They'd go outside at 8 in the morning, come back for lunch and go out again . . . and they were moving all the time."

"Actually, I don't know for sure that athletes are less dedicated today. We had plenty who were damn lazy then too. It seems to me we are just more prone today to slow 'em down, rather than encourage 'em to charge ahead."

"Let's face it, the world was a less interesting place in a lot of ways in 1970. There was less for kids to do. Now, children have more to do, but they use less imagination doing it, and they are less responsible for entertaining themselves." Child psychologist.

The world is different now . . . we can see that clearly. The athletes who come to us have some different qualities than those who came to swimming thirty or even twenty years ago.

Part III. Societal Factors working against Dedication.

Let's list some of those differences:

- 1) They are less physically fit before they ever get into the pool.
- 2) They are much more prone to need "success now" and gratification now.
- 3) They do not have the parental support in many cases that they had in decades past . . . single parent families.

- 4) The parental support they do have may be victim to the parental guilt of lack of attention . . . therefore more protective of their child, less structured, less disciplined.
- 5) There is a modern parental school of thought that says that "children know what they want, and we should follow that want" . . . rather than the parent deciding what is best for the child, up to a certain age.
- 6) Parents' discipline of children has declined severely. The result is that children have less experience with "the limits" and the regulation of their own behavior. They may be less well self-regulated as well. (This leads to 25 year olds who are less self-reliant than many 20 year olds were two decades ago.)
- 7) Excellence is seen as an unrealistic and unattainable objective, and often seen as "not worth the cost" to get there.
- 8) The pace of life in the 90's demands convenience as a primary "sales tool" in the promotion of activities. Too many parents have too many demands placed upon them.
- 9) Modern media depicting interesting stories in life invariably leave out the unglamorous, daily grind function of achievement, and focus on the moment of epiphany, and the drama of failure, redemption and achievement or resolution.

NOTHING SHOWS REAL LIFE

Then, young people grow up expecting life to imitate art. They are stunned to discover that it does not.

"Achievement is 95 % perspiration and 5% inspiration." (I think Mr. Einstein said that.)

Children do not grow up understanding that today.

We wind up with 25 year olds who get out of college, expect a \$40,000 a year job and to drive a new car, and live in a modern apartment overlooking the Golden Gate bridge, and be married to Tom Cruise or Angie Everhart. (Watch any movie about young people.) Our cultural icons are not depicting life as it is.

10) Our young athletes turn into our young coaches, in many cases. How misled are each of us by expectations of immediate gratification?

Which brings us to a hard question. **HAVE YOU EVER BEEN DEDICATED TO ANYTHING?**

Rhetorically, **WHAT? DID YOU SUCCEED IN GETTING THERE?** What did you learn about dedication in the process?

If you answered yes, then review some more questions in your mind.

- 1) Was your dedication constant, or did it wax and wane? (Most people's dedication waxes and wanes. This is usual, not unusual.)
- 2) Was your dedication an "all day event" or was it timely depending on what you were doing? (Some things we are dedicated to require and demand constant attention . . . ask any recovering alcoholic . . . others can and should be total attention one minute, background music another minute.) "Facing the music all the time will make most people deaf." George Haines — famous philosopher!
- 3) Did you set specific goals that made objective your dedication? Did you write them out? Did you do long, short and intermediate goal setting? Did you tell others about your goals, your dedication? Did this help you, or hurt you?
- 4) Was there a religious or spiritual component to your dedication? (For many people there is.) Answer the question, "What is my life all about?"

5) Was dedication enough to achieve your objective? I would argue, no, it is not. Assistance, help, luck, fortune, all come to you when you need it. And NEED is made profound by dedication. The more you put into something, the more profound your need to bring it to fruition. The more profound your need, the more receptive the world is to finding ways to help you, assist you, provide good luck to you, and make you fortunate.

Your own experience with dedication enhances your ability to inspire it in others. I cannot say with surety that those who have never been dedicated to something will fail to inspire dedication in others, but in my experience, I have never seen a person without experience in dedication develop the ability to pass on that value.

This can be a profound stumbling block for the swimming coach interested in improving the dedication of their athletes.

Part IV. Are there allies we can call on in improving the dedication of our athletes and our families?

A) Ourselves, as above. Set aside 30 minutes a day of SILENCE to think about this problem. Silence allows our subconscious mind to work on our challenges. Get comfortable with it. Enforce it in yourself.

B) Other dedicated people. It does not need to be an athlete. Do you know a less-self-interested doctor in your community? How about a police officer? How about a good businessman . . . (explain business as a partnership between provider and client) Dedicated people can explain what they are dedicated to, and how they manifest this dedication, and finally, what their dedication brings them in their lives...

C) The written word. Read. Seek out examples of dedication in people. Copy and circulate those.

Part V. What Can We Do, as Swimming Coaches, to improve the Dedication of our Swimmers and Families?

First, recognize that inspiring dedication is a life, it is not a "program," a "plan" or a "project." If you want a team with a high level of dedication, then you must commit to, and be dedicated yourself, to that aim.

If you want dedication to the sport of swimming, then you must exhibit dedication to the sport, and to the people who temporarily make up your team and your sport. You will be the only constant. Everything else about you will change. Athletes and parents will come and go. Your pool will change, your Boards will change, your Athletic Director or the equivalent will change, but your dedication to the sport must not change.

When your dedication changes, expect the level of dedication of those around you to change. If your's rises, so will your team's. If your's falls, so will your team's.

There is no such thing as a dedicated swimming team without a dedicated coach.

There are managerial tasks in coaching, and leadership tasks. Inspiring dedication is clearly a leadership function.

Lets look at what dedication really means in swimming.

What Do We Want Our Athletes to do and be, as their Dedication increases? First, we want them to be dedicated to what?

Most coaches I spoke with, related the old US Army Slogan, "Be the Very Best That You Can Be!"

In our case, we might paraphrase this as "Be the Very Best Swimmer That You Can Be!"

Is this realistic and reasonable in today's swimming world? Probably not. Many of the clients that we see bring us their children first to learn to swim for safety, then later on they come to swim team. Why? Because their friends are there, because it is a healthy and "clean-cut" activity with low risk of injury — protect our sport from drugs if you want to keep that segment coming — and because it seems like a "fun" activity.

Picture the ordinary summer swim team, and you know why the clients come to us, in general. Some come because they want their children to be 'serious' about something, and increasingly, some come to get their children out from in front of the world of computer games.

NONE COME BECAUSE THEY WANT THEIR CHILDREN, OR THEMSELVES, TO BE DEDICATED TO SWIMMING.

So they come seeking one type of thing and you should make an effort to educate them about, and lead them towards another.

Is this a difficult sell? Of course, or I wouldn't see a need to be here talking about all this.

So that sets the scene about what we face?

Now, how do we increase dedication?

First, we have to decide how we expect dedication to manifest itself. Remember, our goal is to inject as many people as possible with the desire to "be the best swimmer you can be virus". . . .

Getting to practice is certainly one measure of dedication that most coaches would agree on.

Doing a superb job in practice is likely another measure most will agree on. Exactly what "doing a superb job in practice" means will get us into controversy, so let's steer clear of that for the time being.

Life away from practice is also an area most will agree is a concern. Are the athletes taking care of themselves? Do they eat properly, get rest as needed, not abuse their bodies with alcohol, or drugs. Do they try to keep their life simple, so mental focus can stay on swimming?

In the case of teenagers, well, the same can probably be asked, given the speed with which they grow up these days.

You may very well have other areas you are concerned with that reflect dedication. I, for example, regard willingness to attend regular swim meets as a vital thing. Every two weeks for 11-12's, every 3 weeks for 13, 14, 15, 16, and once a month thereafter as a part of preparation for competition. You may have some other criterion. The point is, we must know the behaviors that constitute "increased dedication" to us, and we must try to track and measure them.

Track and Measure them? Absolutely. What gets measured gets done. What gets talked about, gets talked about.

Now, let's discuss Coach Behavior, then we'll get to athletes and parents.

First. Practice Attendance. Are you there? Are you there early? Ready to Go? Morning workout. Do you whine when only one or two show up, or do you make sure that one or two get the best coaching of their lives?

Are you organized, prepared, etc, or are you obviously scrambling around? Athletes sense it, even young ones. Parents can see it when you are ill-prepared. What about after practice? Are you in a rush to leave, or do you stay, chat with swimmers and parents?

Do you cover all the workouts yourself, or do you have an assistant cover some mornings for you? Can you ask athletes to get up and come to some AM workouts while you sleep in?

Second, how hard do you work at your coaching? Do you chart and measure their improvement? Do you plan sessions to cover all their needs as athletes? Do you sit or stand or walk during workouts? Are you active and energetic when you coach?

What is your body language saying to your athletes? If you are excited, they will be also. If you are bored, be sure they will be also. Bob Steele said, "If it's boring to watch, it's boring to do."

Do you know how to make a 3000 free intellectually interesting? If not, learn, or don't expect to have your athletes take it as an interesting challenge. Or, don't plan any 3000 freestyle swims.

Increasing Dedication:

Principle Number One - You get what you ask for. Don't ask for dedication, ask for a specific action.

"I would like to have those who are serious about swimming to attend 5 workouts a week as 10 year olds, 6 per week as 11 year olds, 7 per week as 12 year olds, 7 per week as 13 year olds, 8 per week as 14 and 15 year olds, and 9 per week as 16, 17, and 18 year olds."

"I would like those who are serious about swimming to learn about good eating habits when they are 10. When they are 11, I would like them to learn about the proper methods of stretching, when they are 12, I want them to learn to prepare mentally for peak performance races, when they are 13 I want them to learn about strength building exercises, and how to do them properly."

Ask. What does that mean?

Most coaches tell people MINIMUMS that they expect. If you want dedicated behavior, you have to tell people exactly what the OPTIMUM program is for them. What will they do that will get them the BEST results?

We get so caught up in retention, that this leads to issues of MINIMUMS. What is the minimum I (WE) can do to stay on the team? Some may do the minimum, but we will usually get what we ask for. If we ask for minimums, we will get minimums. Instead, educate with what is BEST.

"The maximum number of water workouts a child should do at age 8 is five per week. The maximum number of workouts I would like you to do per week at age 16 is nine. This will allow you the best opportunity to improve."

Will many people take you up on your "best" program? Not initially. But that will become the standard by which they measure themselves, rather than the minimum.

Not many athletes will become totally dedicated. Not many ever have. But more will exhibit the behaviors that you want, when you ask for the best, not as a minimum, but as a provision of information.

"But I don't want to know about the best, I want to know the minimum to stay on the team." "Sorry Jane, but I see my job as telling you what you should do to become the best you can be. You have to make your own decisions from there."

Principle Number Two - Are you running a participation program, or are you running a program for excellence? This is a major philosophical difference.

The Y philosophy, versus the excellence philosophy. Can you create dedicated excellence in a Y setting? Most coaches will tell you NO. I'm not picking on Y's but their organizational philosophy is clear-cut, and it does not really include excellence.

AN EXCELLENCE PROGRAM CAN INCLUDE PARTICIPATION, BUT A PARTICIPATION PROGRAM IS UNLIKELY TO PRODUCE EXCELLENCE.

An excellence program describes how to be the best you can be, and a participation program describes the minimums to participate.

Principle Number Three - ONE IS ENOUGH.

You are unlikely to come up with a dedicated TEAM right off the bat. Once you have outlined what you consider to be the excellent program that reflects the dedication that you want, are you offering it?

If one person decides they want it, are you offering it? Will you come in the morning for one person? Will you stay the extra hour in the pool and the exercise room for that person?

Coaches say to me all the time, "Well, this is what I want, but I can't get my TEAM to do it." That's correct. The whole team won't, but I assure you that at least one person will. There is always one person in a crowd who wants to buy the Mercedes, and not the Ford. Even in "Ford" town. Are you willing to sell the Mercedes to one person? If you are, then you are in business. If you are not, then you're a dreamer. NO ONE GETS A DEDICATED TEAM. Coaches get dedication ONE PERSON AT A TIME.

Get that one person who buys into your plan everything they need. If you are selling morning workouts, make sure that every special good thing you can do, gets done in those morning workouts. You have no time to video tape when you have 40 people in the pool in the afternoon? Fine, videotape in the morning. If there is no time for starts in the afternoon, fine, teach her starts in the morning.

Do whatever is special, at that "additional" session.

Now, if you're a good coach, and have a good plan, that one athlete is going to improve faster than all the other athletes on your team. Make sure you politely point out that she is improving that much faster. And by the way, "You know she's coming mornings, don't you?" Be consistent. Keep it going and soon, number two will come in the door at morning workouts. And later, number three, and so on. But you have to accept that ONE IS ENOUGH.

Measure improvement. Post on a bulletin Board how many people were at morning workout that day. Every day. Circle the highest days in red. Later, set goals, and ask everyone to get there on one day to set a new team record for AM workouts. Measure total workout attendance. Post it. Measure workouts per week. Record them, promote those numbers.

Whatever behavior you want, measure it, record it, promote it.

Now, what about parents? Most of our athletes, till they turn 16 depend on parents for most of the things that allow them to be dedicated. (And most, after 16, still have to get the family car.)

No doubt that you must convince the parents, as well as the child, that a greater degree of dedication is desirable. In this day and age, you will initially fail in this far more often than you will succeed. The pressures on parents are huge today, and they usually will think in terms of minimums. To persuade parents, you must demonstrate the rewards of dedication. What will the child gain from being dedicated to swimming? If you cannot answer this question, you will struggle to win over the parents.

I would suggest that, short of a sudden change in the economic conditions surrounding swimming, you do not have much in the way of an economic argument. The amount of money being handed out in college scholarships is such that if they saved the swim fees, meet fees, travel costs, etc., they could do better than they will with a scholarship, unless the child is exceptional. What then, is your argument? I believe it must be on the side of character, values, and the experience of striving for excellence. Many parents will not buy any of that.

And there, precisely, is why I personally feel we have a perception that we have fewer dedicated athletes today than we have had in the past. Fewer parents see dedication to a sport as a way to improve the character of their child. (How many even think about how to improve the character of their child?) You must be able to articulate this argument well if you are to convince parents to commit more time, more energy, more effort, into their child's swimming.

I believe that swimming can build character. I believe, like anything good, it takes time to demonstrate this improvement. The parent, and the child, and the coach, must be patient enough to see these changes develop.

I believe that swimming can teach you to respect men and women equally. Women, in most cases, train harder and better than men. I believe that swimming can teach you that work comes before reward. Hard work brings you bigger rewards. I believe that swimming can teach you that it takes a team. No one can make it on their own. The success of the team is the result of the hard work of individuals. And individuals cannot do the hard work on their own.

I believe that swimming can teach you honesty — honesty with yourself. At the end of a set of 12 x 400, you learn if you can honestly say, "I'm giving it all I've got."

I believe that swimming can teach you respect. Respect for your own effort, and respect for the effort of others. Respect is the precursor of achievement. First you respect, then you move closer to what you respect. Respect acts as a magnet.

I believe that swimming can teach you love. Love comes when desire is transmuted through struggle and challenge into reality. And the reality is beautiful. We love swimming because swimming touches us, and because we touch and transform swimming. The interaction is emotional and filled with love.

I believe that swimming can teach you the power of passion. You can learn that success will come only when you bring forth your best in support of something you care for.

Respect, work, team, honesty, love, passion — what else matters in the formation of character? I can sell it to some people. What matters is, can you?

A final note. One of the disturbing moments in swim coaching is when you discuss with your 12 year old swimmer that what she really wants to do on this particular 100 freestyle is to go a best time. She clearly tells you that this is what she wants. You cleverly set her up with the perfect effort plan for her race, so she will do that. She follows the plan perfectly, then comes back to you in tears. "Rachel," you ask, "what is the matter? You went a best time by 2 seconds!"

"Yes, but Suzy beat Me!"

Ah ha!, the goal was met, but it turns out it was not really the goal after all.

How does this relate to dedication and swimming?

If you want dedication, you can have it. I hope today has given you some good ideas as to how to go after it. BUT, don't expect to earn much money from working with dedicated swimmers.

The money is in the other end — in learn to swim. All the wealthiest people I know in swimming are primarily involved in learn to swim. The money can be in the masses, in the satisfaction of relatively low goals.

When you work with dedicated athletes they cannot possibly afford to pay you properly for your time and energy. And the time you spend with them, cannot be spent again elsewhere, lining your pocket or your wallet. You can earn a lot of money, or you can work with dedicated athletes. You will have a very difficult time doing both.

So know how much money is enough, and do not later say, "Gee, I worked with dedicated athletes, and I'm still poor". Of course you are. Dedication means sacrifice. Congratulations. You've made it.

Be careful what you wish for. Wishes USUALLY come true.

Perhaps there is a time for all things, a time for dedication, and a time to take care of our families!